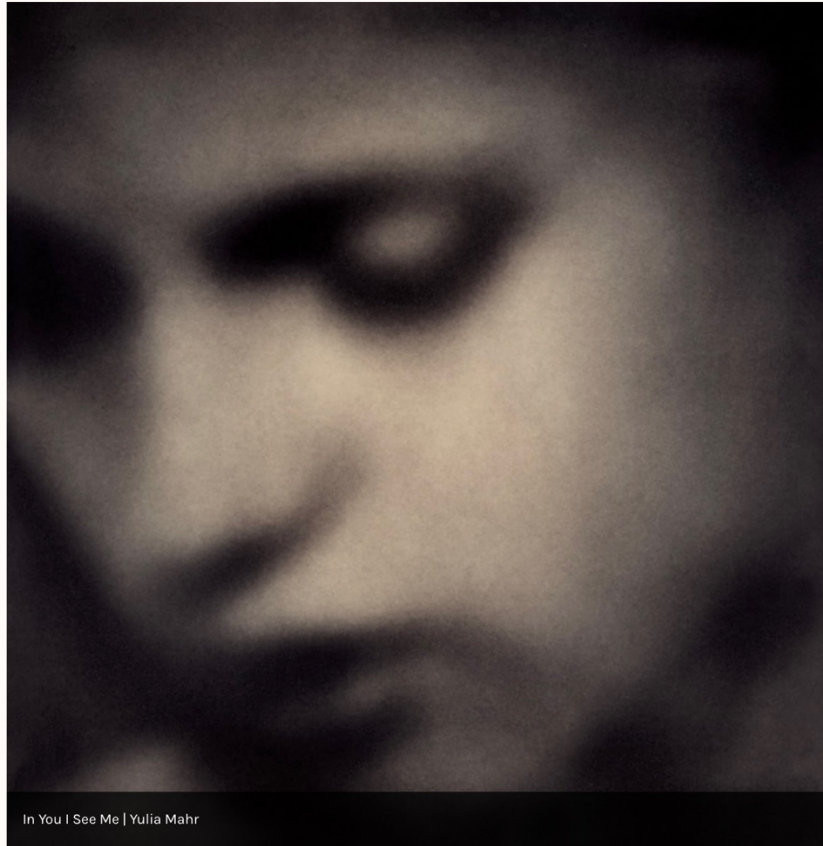


YULIA MAHR. AN INTERVIEW.



In You I See Me | Yulia Mahr

Acclaimed lens-based artist Yulia Mahr speaks with writer Lauren Smith about her career, the central themes of her solo exhibition at SERCHIA, and her evolution as an artist.

01

One of the things that struck me most about your work is the way it combines closeness and intimacy with the feeling of distance, or remove, that comes from the layering that's so central to your process. It creates a feeling of being held in time, being caught in the kind of moment you might come across in poetry.

Is this feeling of suspension something you're working through when creating these pieces – looking perhaps for a kind of release – or is it something you hope people feel in front of your work?

Yulia

Both in a way, I'm very deliberately working with a poetic sensibility – condensing layers of meaning into a single image or sculpture. I am trying to get across a sense of the entire world behind each work, with the work itself acting almost as a portal to this world. So, the aim is that everything works on many levels at once, and these levels are meticulously inter-related within the final form of the work. This takes time – fundamentally it is an iterative process, and I think it's this that provides the works with that feeling of suspension.

I'm always looking for resonance – a recognition of something in the work that also provides space for personal interpretation – for the viewer's own lives to enter this relationship. I don't want to tie up all the loose ends, but rather leave them to speak to one another. And it's this interior dialogue within the work that I hope allows people to engage with it from many alternate angles.



02

There's a subtle thread of tactility running throughout your art, from the grainy texture of the marble pigment in *The Quiet Uncertainty of Stone* series to the soft, almost porous woodland installations of 'In You / See Me'.

What does texture mean to you and your practice? Is this feeling of suspension something you're working through when creating these pieces – looking perhaps for a kind of release – or is it something you hope people feel in front of your work?

Yulia

While visibility dominates Western Culture and trumps our other senses, it's just one piece of the jigsaw puzzle of existence. If there's one thing I've taken from my years studying and teaching Visual Anthropology, it is that sensoriality accesses the deep recesses of our minds and opens doorways for interpretation and understanding. I'm always consciously weaving in touch, texture and smell in many of my works.





03

The show includes a piece of sculpture, and you've mentioned feeling drawn to that medium when thinking about the future. I'm wondering about time, permanence, and the idea of taking up space. You begun your career in theatre, and you're now creating these beautiful pieces of lens-based art in Studio Richter Mahr, where you call home.

Can we sketch an arc through your work in that way – one that traces an evolution from ephemeral, performance based art to forms that endure, like your photographs – with sculpture the most recent iteration of that shift towards permanence?

Yulia

I'm still uncomfortable with what I largely see as the male teleology that underlies the concept of permanence in the Western canon, and most of my work interrogates impermanence as a central theme, so I don't think so, though I have been pondering this philosophically a lot myself.



04

The title of the show, 'As it was / So it is' hints at the coexistence of the past and the present. There's an anthropological quality to all of your work and I'm wondering what kind of cycles you see recurring in the world at the moment that many of us might overlook or perhaps don't notice.

What kind of spirals do you think may we be in (thinking of Louise Bourgeois), or what kind of opposing forces do you feel may be acting upon us?

Yulia

This is a fascinating question that I don't feel I can do justice to here, but broadly ... The overarching themes of agency, identity, representation and our relationship to the natural world are constantly being recast in new social contexts, but the basic questions remain. As for the larger drama of our species on this little ball of rock, in spite of Mark Twain's comment that, "history doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes", I'd prefer to hope for a future of beautiful ungovernable free verse beyond any pre-existing formulas.





05

Vulnerability is a central theme to your work, and it's something people resonate and connect with deeply. It takes strength and bravery to continually strip back the layers of yourself and reveal them in art.

Have you found your relationship to vulnerability has changed over time — have you had to dig deeper — or it more of a constant that grounds you in your practice?

Yulia

It's a constant that grounds me in my practice. My yard stick for approaching the working day. I'm instinctively drawn to vulnerability — rejecting anything that falls short. I didn't always do this. In the early days, an intellectual distance governed all my thinking — I was all about messaging and ideas. But then I started to think about why I never did any work that spoke to my personal story, that addressed my own journey in life. And in that moment, I understood that trauma — and my journey had been traumatic — silences. I couldn't talk about anything close to me because I felt deeply ashamed and wanting. I was seeking, above all, at all moments to 'fit in'. And in that instant, I also understood that I could break the cycle and head in a completely different direction.